

Classicists in low places: what popular fiction reveals about our discipline

Classicists have proved interesting to contemporary novelists in recent years. Joanne Harris' *A Narrow Door* (2021), Phoebe Wynne's *Madam* (2021), Clare Pollard's *Delphi* (2022), and Mark Prins' *The Latinist* (2022) have all appeared within the last four years. Each of these might be described as relatively highbrow; serious literary fiction designed to appeal to an audience of informed and educated readers, and their portrayal of the discipline offers some intriguing and revealing perceptions from outside the profession of what Classics actually is. But no less intriguing are portrayals of the discipline in less highbrow productions, whose imaginary classicists often have surprisingly common ground with those of more serious fiction.

This paper will discuss two of these in the broader context of the portrayal of Classics and classicists in recent fiction. Michael Hemmigson's *The Classics Professor* in the Choose Your Own Erotic Fantasy Series (2003) is a collection of several intertwined stories recounting different possible versions of an affair between young academic Mark and rich, sexually rapacious and often perverse Classics professor Wendy Lake. Wendy is notably dominant, not only sexually but in her media profile and potently prolific publication, which sometimes commands six-figure advances. This may ring truer as a fantasy of professional classicists than some of the sexual encounters do. The reader is addressed throughout in the second person singular to help them "become" Mark. Although the classical content is essentially a vehicle for endlessly varied erotic stimuli, it is often surprisingly realistic: scenarios include being overawed at one's first faculty party; an older male professor who equates Wendy's popular media work with a lack of rigor; or the insecurities of a young academic vying for an elusive tenure track job. In one memorable permutation, Mark must supplement his meagre assistant professor's pay by

acting in Graeco-Roman pornographic videos. In a fine deployment of the *dives amator* trope of Roman elegy, in some threads, Wendy taunts Mark with her other lovers who give her more extravagant gifts than “you” can.

The second novel under discussion is *Wicked!* by Jilly Cooper. Jilly Cooper is a popular British writer, known as the queen of the “bonkbuster”, a term referring to a subgenre of commercial romance novels with typically glamorous, wealthy and sexually active protagonists. It is rather surprising, therefore, to meet Theo Graham, an elderly “bald, jug-eared and jag-toothed” Euripidean scholar, who is atypical of characters in the bonkbuster genre. Theo is, however, entirely typical of the portrayal of classicists in earlier fiction. He is eternally beleaguered by modernizing scientists who view his discipline as a waste of time, and by tenuous enrollments in his classes. *Wicked!* is avowedly a novel about British social class (a prevailing theme of many of Cooper’s publications) and what happens when stereotypically privileged people encounter stereotypically unprivileged people: Theo conforms to traditional associations of Classics through his employment at Bagley Hall, an exclusive private school whose impressive architecture, facilities and curriculum alienate, intimidate and inspire envy in the teachers and pupils from the local state school.

This paper will explore the classicist protagonists in these two novels, arguing that their portrayal of Classics and classicists is a significant indication of how writers and audiences outside our discipline might view Classics. Although neither Hemmigson nor Cooper are writing serious literature whose purpose is deliberately to imagine the field (unlike Prins 2022 and other recent novels) they unwittingly reveal some significant ideas about what Classics is in the popular imagination, and those ideas are surprisingly aligned with the portrayal of Classics in more avowedly serious novels.

Bibliography

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